

# Family Ties

## Working with mom isn't so bad after all

By **Melissa Davis**

The time had come for Rita Carlson to pack her bags, leave Roswell, N.M., and move to Texas. She was heading to El Paso to begin her new position with the Department of Defense.

Then fate intervened. "I knew El Paso wasn't the right place for my mother, and Houston has so much more to offer," said her daughter, Johnson Space Center employee Kari Carlson. "I suggested she submit her resume to United Space Alliance. The day she was to leave for El Paso, USA made an offer."

"The movers were coming to pick me up the morning that USA called and offered me a position here," Rita recalled. Kari added: "I heard the sigh of relief all the way here in Houston."

That was nearly two years ago and mother and daughter have worked together at JSC ever since. Kari works on the International Space Station Command and Telemetry production team; Rita coordinates the Operational Readiness Test for Systems Division (DF) and Robotics & Crew Systems Operations (DX-EVA), as well as the Common Display Development Team Test for DF, DX and the Operations Division.

The two have enjoyed working together from the beginning. "It is exciting for me to see my mom so involved with her job because she loves the work

she does," Kari said. Family ties are not uncommon at JSC. Yet, what is it like for a mother to work with the one she has given birth to? "I believe our both working for the space program provides a very special bond, which goes beyond what we share as mother and daughter," said Carol Pierce, a senior editor in the Flight Data File area. Her daughter Laurel Morrow is an administrative assistant in the Astronaut office.

"I feel it is both an honor and a privilege to be even just a small part of something so very special and important as the space program."

Laurel said working at JSC is a source of personal pride for both her and her mother. "It is like a family business of sorts," she said, adding that her father used to work for NASA and then for Rockwell/USA, and her aunt, mother-in-law and husband work at JSC too.

JSC employees Betty Brown and her daughter Carrie Brown Sudduth also have deep roots in the space program. Betty is a Program Analyst in the Customer and

Flight Integration Office of the Space Shuttle Program and the book manager for the Flight Tests and Supplementary Objectives Document. Carrie is on the Export Services Team as the Export Coordinator, organizing JSC licenses, training for the Center and other various aspects of export control.

"My daughter Carrie was born in Titusville, Fla., during the Apollo Program, while her Dad worked at Kennedy Space Center. Her son was born in Houston during the Space Shuttle Program," Betty said. "Our family history is intertwined in the history of the space program."

For Carrie, it seems NASA has always been a part of her life. "I remember coming to work at NASA with my mom as a child for various reasons," she said, "and it's made being part of such a leading edge environment that much more enjoyable because, in a way, it's personal too."

Often hectic lives keep mothers from spending time with their children after hours, so working together at JSC can provide the opportunity to have some

quality time together. Kari Carlson said it is fun having her mom here. "We can call each other any time and have lunch together," she said. "As you can imagine, since both of us work in the space industry, we have to limit our talk of work, otherwise dad feels left out in the conversation. I'm sure many people can relate to that."

Laurel Morrow enjoys having her mom at JSC too. "Sometimes with my busy personal life, I don't get to talk to my mother except here at work," she said.

For Rita and Kari Carlson, being together outside the home is nothing new. "For me, it is wonderful to be able to work near her. We also went to college together and shared an apartment," Rita said. Kari earned her bachelor's degree in mathematics and computer science; Rita earned her master's degree in mathematics.

"I never thought it would be possible to be able to work together. It is the greatest thing that could have happened to me." ■

*A special thanks goes to the many JSC employees and retirees who contacted the Roundup with their story ideas! While we couldn't use them all we appreciate the stories that were shared.*

## 'Ruth's daughter'

By **Barbara "B.J." Tomaro**

I began working at NASA in April of 1988, and from that day forward I had to change my name. I was no longer Barb, or even B.J., as some knew me. From that day on I was simply "Ruth's Daughter."

It's not as if that would be so horrible really, but I now understand what my mother must have gone through raising five kids. On the day that my oldest brother started to school, she became somebody's mommy, and though her first name changed from time to time, the second one seemed to stick. You would think this would cause an identity crisis, but she wore it like a badge of honor.

She precariously balanced home and career with the stealth of a tightrope walker, teetering now and then, but never losing control. Tiptoeing with determination across that slender line and, at least in the eyes of her family, dancing high above her world. Her savvy and sense of humor came so naturally that we took it for granted. We never knew there were others out there who also recognized the value of her advice and the strength of her

shoulders in time of need. We believed she was ours alone.

That misguided opinion changed suddenly when I started to work at NASA. My mother had been working on the same contract since 1971, and for many of those years she worked in Human Resources. For her it was the perfect mating of personality and position. Everyone who came to her office left with the feeling that she truly cared and she would do her best.

Some who visited didn't really come for advice, they just needed to talk. Mom called this "venting." Us kids had done this for years, but we never knew others did it as well. We thought that somewhere between the Christmas stockings and Easter egg hunts she had invented it just for us. My new fellow employees were more than happy to regale me with stories of my mother and her ability to listen to the ranting of otherwise normal employees. I was told that some people vented so well that mother had to replace the potted trees in her office with the more durable rubber variety.

Though many years ago she transferred from Human Resources, and has

## Mother's Day is

# May 13

Mother's Day is the second Sunday in May.

since retired, there are many people who still seek her out. Apparently they have grown to depend on her in much the same way that we did. I remember that as I stumbled through adolescence I found the usual faults with my parents that most teen-agers encounter; but I have since discovered to my amazement that the older I get, the smarter my mother becomes.

In 1996, my mother suffered a devastating stroke. Her world and mine were turned upside down. Suddenly gone were the quick wit and ready counsel I had come to rely on. There were days that I believed I would lose her altogether. The doctors seemed so convinced she wouldn't make it through the critical first 72 hours. Or, if by some miracle she did, how much would she have left? But my mother had always had a tremendous faith and had taught us to expect miracles. My brothers, sisters and I prayed that, once again, she would prove to be right.

As the days progressed, she struggled to identify even the simplest things - where she was, what year it was or the food she was eating. Worst of all, the woman with whom I had once shared my innermost thoughts, hopes and dreams, was now unable to even remember my name. Our roles were reversed and I became her caretaker, protector and occasional tormentor as my brother and I quizzed her with pictures and word

games to help her brain re-path around the damaged area. Through it all, she never gave up, and she never complained. Though I knew she wanted to, it wasn't her style.

I realize now that even in her illness, she again taught me some of the most significant lessons in my life—perseverance and the importance of family. Then one day in the hospital we were going through our usual routine of questions and answers, and I asked her who I was. I cannot begin to describe the euphoria I felt by her matter-of-fact response: "You're my daughter, Barb."

As my Mother continues to recover, I let her know in every way I can that I love her. Never again will I take our time together for granted. I cherish each precious moment because I realize how quickly we might lose them.

And now those words that used to make me feel like I had no identity have helped me define who I am, and I could never adequately express the tremendous feeling of pride that rushes over me when someone asks, "Are you Ruth's daughter?"

It's still not an easy cross to bear. She has, after all, left me with enormous shoes to fill. But how lucky I am that she is my mom, and she is willing to continually remind me that I have big feet.

Happy Mother's Day from "Ruth's Daughter"! ■



It took some getting used to, but JSC employee Barbara 'B.J.' Tomaro no longer minds being called 'Ruth's daughter' after her mother, retired JSC employee Ruth Tomaro.